Incorporating a Health Element into the Santa Clara County, CA General Plan: Fostering collaboration across county and city agencies

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BACKGROUND

In 2011, Santa Clara County initiated an effort to draft and adopt a Health Element for the County General Plan.

General plans (also called comprehensive plans in other parts of the country), provide a long-term vision and serve as the "constitution" of a jurisdiction. California state law requires general plans to include certain chapters or elements, including circulation (transportation), housing, conservation, open space, noise, and safety; health elements are optional.

The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors (BOS) adopted a Health in All Policies (HiAP) resolution in 2005 to address health needs of county residents through better policy and community planning. The purpose of the Health Element was to build on this framework to address community health through prevention, education, and environmental settings that promote rather than detract from community health.

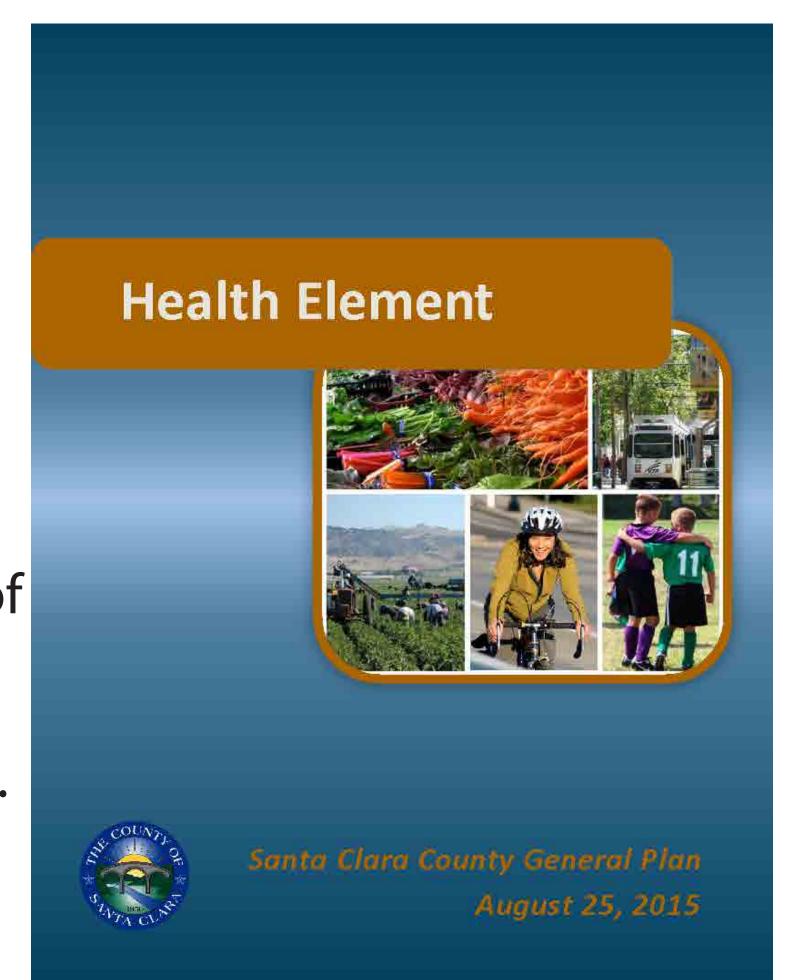
The steps the County took to draft and adopt a Health Element align with HiAP and demonstrated that public health planning is as important as, for example, having a housing or transportation element in a General Plan. Given that most jurisdictions have not adopted health elements, the BOS expressed interest in ensuring Santa Clara County's Health Element would serve as a model for other cities and organizations in the county and as a means for reducing healthcare spending (The County is a major healthcare provider).

Santa Clara County encompasses 15 cities in the heart of Silicon Valley and is the most populous and diverse of the San Francisco Bay Region counties, with nearly 1.9 million residents (33.9 percent White, 26.8 percent Latino, 34.1 percent Asian-Pacific Islander). More than 4 in 10 adults ages 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, and the median household income was estimated at \$91,702 in 2013. Despite its relative affluence, approximately 1 in 5 county residents live at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$48,500 for a family of four in 2015). Moreover, due to its rapid growth in population and increasing and prohibitively high costs of housing, the self-sufficiency standard for a family of four consisting of two adults, one infant, and one school-aged child was estimated to be \$86,399 in 2014 (362 percent of the federal poverty level).

The County ranks 3rd in California in measures of community health,⁷ but it also experiences significant health disparities; childhood overweight and obesity is as high as 44 percent in the City of Gilroy and as low as 15 percent in the Town of Los Gatos.⁸

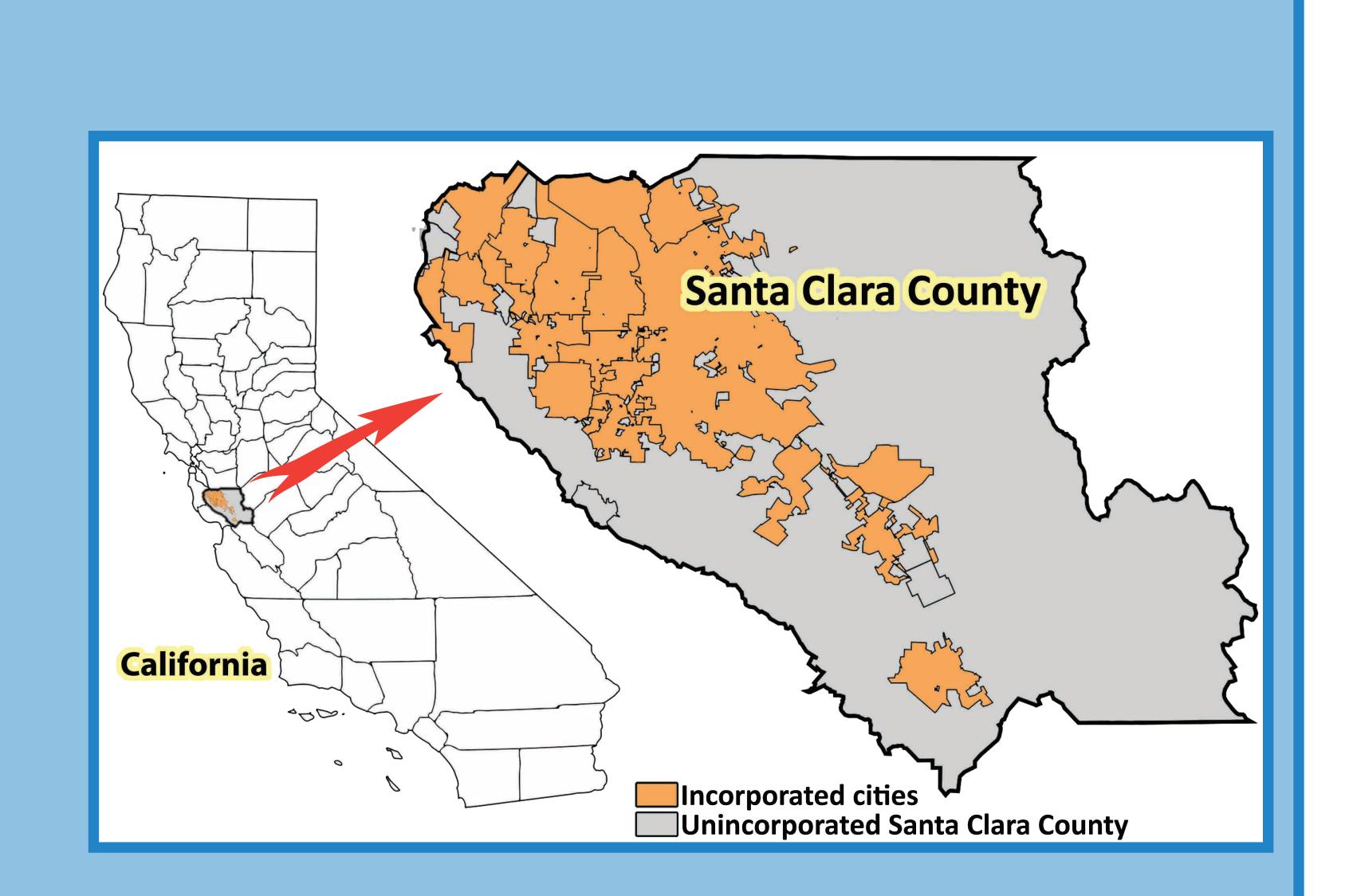
PROCESS

Creating an inclusive, innovative, and inspirational health element required the participation of myriad stakeholders in Santa Clara County, with the Planning Office within the Department of Planning and Development serving as the principal agency. Early in the process, the Office engaged the Department of



Public Health as a major collaborator. Funding sources included grants from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a local nonprofit organization, and County funds. Important partners included consultants, Raimi + Associates, a Staff Advisory Committee (made up of other county agencies and departments), a Wellness Advisory Committee (made up of community stakeholders), commissions, interest groups, and the general public.

An assessment of current conditions, the "Community Health Existing Conditions Report" (ECR), was developed and released in 2012. The ECR would prove critical to informing the content of the Health Element. In the summer of 2014, partners completed the first draft of the Health Element for public comment. Planning and Public Health staff revised the Health Element multiple times to address concerns of the public, the County Planning Commission, and the County Board of



Supervisors. Since its inception, the Health Element focused on prevention, community empowerment, equity, and sustainability, and emphasized the need for additional collaboration to ensure its implementation.

RESULTS

The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors adopted a final Health Element on August 25, 2015, consisting of major strategies and policies in nine sections (listed below):

- 1. Health conditions, health equity, and access
- 2. Social and emotional health
- 3. Land use and urban design
- 4. Active and sustainable transportation
- 5. Recreation and physical activity
- 6. Healthy eating, food access, and sustainable food systems
- 7. Air quality and climate change
- 8. Healthy housing
- 9. Violence prevention and safety

DISCUSSION

Santa Clara County is among the first major counties in California to adopt a Health Element and now has the most comprehensive free-standing Health Element in the state. The Health Element enjoyed broad support because of its progressive and innovative approach. Its overarching goals and policy directions also aligned with the County's mission and goals, and it was drafted and revised to ensure that important issues and policies reflected the consensus of major stakeholders. Authors of the Health Element were largely able to accommodate or address suggestions and concerns brought to the County Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors by the public.

The process of creating the Health Element furthered the County's efforts to promote Health in All Policies and has also deepened the Public Health Department's relationship with Planning, other County departments, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, cities, and countless other community partners. The County will build upon its partnerships as it implements and enforces the policies within the Health Element to create a healthier community.

For more information about the Health Element please contact the Santa Clara County Public Health Department at 408-793-2700, or the Office of Planning at 408-299-5749. To





Among the policies included in the Health Element, many focus on promoting equitable access to healthy foods, physical activity, and safe

access the adopted Health Element, scan the QR code at the bottom of this page or visit http://bit.ly/1L1KWZK.

REFERENCES

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